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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001890

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: SAAD HARIRI: WEIGHING PROS AND CONS OF
SLEIMAN

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Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman for Reasons: Section 1.4 (b)
and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Majority leader Saad Hariri, for lack of a better solution, is still intent on electing Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander Michel Sleiman as president just two days from now. He claims to have received assurances from Sleiman on issues of key importance to the U.S. and believes he will bring good people into the cabinet. March 14 ally Samir Geagea, meanwhile, calling for more time, has presented a temporary stumbling block, while Hariri insists time is of the essence to avoid playing into the opposition's hands or risking violence in the streets. End summary.

FRENCH NO LONGER PLAYING WITH SYRIANS

2. (C) The Ambassador, accompanied by Pol/Econ Chief, met with majority leader Saad Hariri at his office in Qoreitem on November 28. Hariri advisors Ghattas Khoury and Nader Hariri and notetaker Nadine Chehab also attended the meeting. Hariri, in his usual calm, cigar-smoking, striving to do his best in the face of impending doom mode, was still lambasting the French for "screwing it up," as he reportedly told French Ambassador Andre Parant earlier in the day, and trusting the Syrians. He did not think the French were still trying to work a deal with the Syrians, citing the cancellation of a visit scheduled two days earlier by Syrian FM Mouallem to Paris. Sarkozy envoy Claude Gueant's last contact with Syria was on November 25, and Kouchner himself had told Gueant to cancel the Mouallem visit.

3. (C) Hariri said he was now turning to Turkey (he had sent a messenger the day before to see PM Erdogan), insisting they take action as he claimed they had promised. The Syrians, the message went, playing with everyone, were pushing Lebanon into a void that would destroy the country.

LOOKING FOR A SOLUTION, ANY SOLUTION

4. (C) Turning to March 14's decision to try to elect Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander Michel Sleiman, Hariri

said, I'm trying my best to get a president, even though Sleiman is not what anyone wants or ever dreamed would happen. But there are big clouds over March 14; the French initiative undermined our whole effort to elect a March 14 candidate, Arab support was not what we wanted, and, even though the U.S. made good public statements, it did not translate into strong international support for a half plus one vote. I'm not blaming anyone, Hariri said, just trying to find a solution. (In a one-on-one conversation with the Ambassador at the end of the meeting, Hariri added that, when he was in Washington in September, U.S. officials asked him whether Maronite Patriarch Sfeir was on board for a half-plus-one vote for president. Hariri said that the message, while unstated, was clear: if Sfeir wasn't on board, the U.S. did not advise moving in this direction.)

15. (C) I'll go with Michel Edde if they want, Hariri continued, but in that case I won't play a role in the government. An 18-month Edde presidency would result in "tremendous" political gains for Hizballah and Aoun, he argued, allowing them to choose the next LAF commander and other key positions, leaving March 14 no choice but to "slowly but surely" surrender. At least with Sleiman, he said, we'll have a better chance of standing up to Hizballah.

16. (C) Khoury, speaking to the Ambassador and Pol/Econ Chief before Hariri arrived, predicted there would be no election, even with Sleiman as the candidate. It's like with Robert Ghanem, he argued, we'll say yes and then the opposition will say no. They don't want a president at all. We'll remain without a president until something changes in the region, he said.

ASSURANCES ON CABINET:
GOOD GUYS IN, BAD GUYS OUT

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17. (C) On what assurances March 14 hoped to get from Sleiman, Hariri said it depended on the vote. If Hizballah did not vote, it would remain outside the government. And, he added, if I'm prime minister I'll make sure Aoun is not; "I'll strip him of everything he has." Reporting that he had spoken with Sleiman about Marada leader Sleiman Franjeh, the LAF Commander reportedly said he would put a "big X" on his participation in the cabinet, begging Hariri not to ask so he wouldn't have to say no. Sleiman assured Hariri he would not nominate Franjeh to a cabinet position, because he would not nominate someone who had "cursed" his father's grave (assassinated former PM Rafiq Hariri).

18. (C) Keep in mind the new political reality, Saad said. Sleiman told me he must be the guarantor of the Christians, and break the Sunni/Shia deadlock, in order to undermine what the opposition is trying to do (i.e., create a Sunni-Christian divide in the country). He understands that the country's reconciliation needs to be on solid ground, Hariri claimed.

19. (C) Asked whether Sleiman might still be a Syrian trap, Hariri answered with an emphatic "La!" (No!) He won't be March 8 in disguise he said; he's already suggesting names of good people for cabinet positions, like former MP Nazim Khoury.

ASSURANCES ON ARMY LEADERSHIP,
SPECIAL TRIBUNAL, UNSCR 1701, ETC.

10. (C) Hariri admitted Sleiman was reluctant to name names for the new LAF commander and LAF G-2 Intelligence Director, explaining that he was afraid of shooting himself in the foot if he is not elected president. Saad, however, assured the Ambassador that Sleiman would not be able to nominate anyone

without his blessing. Both will be "sympathetic" to the U.S., Khoury added. Sleiman nominated good people to all the key LAF positions except the G-2 (Georges Khoury), Hariri said, where he tried but failed due to pressure from Defense Minister Elias Murr, who at the time was still with President Lahoud.

¶11. (C) On the Special Tribunal, the Ambassador asked whether Sleiman would deliver Lahoud if prosecuted. "With a big smile," Hariri answered. On these issues, Sleiman would not play games, he said confidently. Michel Edde would, but Sleiman knows he needs me, as leader of the Sunnis, to keep the army intact; remember, Sunnis make up half the armed forces. Hariri also cited Nahr al-Barid as an example of Sleiman's unwillingness to take orders from the Syrians. He can be influenced to make the right decisions, he added. In addition, Sleiman never stole anything, Hariri offered; check his bank account!

¶12. (C) On UNSCR 1701, Hariri said Sleiman had played an important role in the cessation of hostilities after the 2006 war and, despite Hizballah's warning, moved 15,000 LAF troops to Lebanon's southern border. Sleiman is "solid on the ground," he said, when did he ever do wrong by us? I thought on January 23 (when Sleiman refrained from breaking up Hizballah demonstrators intend on closing the airport) that he might be a Syrian stooge, but I realized later that he had made the right move by letting them get it out of their system rather than risk a Christian-Muslim confrontation.

ACT NOW BEFORE OPPOSITION TURNS TO VIOLENCE

¶13. (C) We are weighing the pros and cons, Hariri admitted, but we must act quickly, especially with a "crazy man like Aoun" willing to "go all the way." Noting that March 14's decision to go with Sleiman had started to leak to the press, Hariri warned that if the vote did not occur this week, it would not happen. Aoun would "jump the gun" and Hizballah would react, perhaps even by sending people to the streets. Just look at what happened yesterday in Tripoli, he said, referring to a clash between pro-Syrian Christian and pro-March 14 Sunni forces that resulted in at least one death. This won't be a Sunni-Shia clash, he predicted, it will be in our backyard, in Tripoli, the Biqa', and Mount

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Lebanon. Unless we have a strong forces on our side, there will be blood on my hands -- and I don't want one drop. I'm not afraid to test them, but once the process starts, you never know where it might end up. Nader added that there also were rumors of demonstrations beginning November 30 to mark the first anniversary of the establishment of Hizballah's "tent city" in downtown Beirut.

ELECTION BY END OF WEEK, IF GEAGEA PLAYS ALONG

¶14. (C) Hariri said the meeting of March 14 leaders (himself, Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea, and Phalange leader Amine Gemayel) the previous evening had gone well, with all on board to support Sleiman's presidency. Things then suddenly changed this morning, when Geagea said he needed more time to think things over. Geagea could ruin the whole thing, Hariri complained, he's making a "fatal mistake," all because he didn't get names for the new LAF Commander and G-2 Director from Sleiman. He's also demanding five cabinet positions, he complained (Note: A disproportionate number given that Lebanese Forces has only five out of the majority's 68 MPs. End note). Geagea needs to realize that crushing Aoun is a victory in and of itself, Hariri argued. He fears, Khoury added, that Sleiman will join forces with Suleiman Franjieh, leaving his Christians out in the cold.

¶15. (C) Hariri said he planned to visit Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri later that day to discuss Sleiman's candidacy and

the necessary constitutional amendment. (Note. Sleiman himself met with Berri earlier the same day. End note.) Cabinet would meet on November 29 to begin steps to amend the constitution, and then, if all went well, parliament could vote on November 30 as scheduled. If not, Hariri predicted, we'll all go to parliament on Friday looking like idiots, and Berri will postpone the session for another two weeks.

COMMENT

¶16. (C) Supporting Sleiman for president is obviously not a decision Hariri and his March 14 allies are taking lightly. Having swallowed the bitter pill that Sleiman is the best they can do (assuming they get Geagea back on board, which at the time of writing looked optimistic), they now want to see the process to the end as quickly as possible. This makes sense for three reasons. First, to elect a president on November 30, the next scheduled vote. Second, to avoid having the opposition, assuming Sleiman is its stealth candidate, pull the rug out from under them by winning Sleiman over to its side by making it appear the opposition is the one promoting his candidacy. And finally, to avoid giving the opposition time, should its goal actually be no elections, to foil Sleiman's election. The fact that Berri has now met with Sleiman is surely a sign that the Speaker has gotten wind of the plot and already has planned his next move one way or another.

¶17. (C) We have made it clear to Geagea that, if indeed Sleiman is the candidate, it is much better for March 14 to be united, with its Christian members leading the charge, in terms of what comes next. We are told that only "technical" obstacles remain before Geagea climbs back on board, obstacles that nevertheless must be overcome in the next few hours if March 14 hopes to elect Sleiman less than 48 hours from now. End comment.

FELTMAN